

AN OPEN LETTER TO PETA

By Ken Hinman

Dear PETA,

PETA stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Frankly, that's an idea this person has trouble standing against. There is a lot of mistreatment of animals in this world, some of it pretty heinous, and lord knows, they can't speak up for themselves.

I'm an environmentalist and I often describe my job as speaking for the fish. So am I wrong not to be anti-fishing, to be in fact pro-fishing? You obviously think so. I've seen your ads, the ones showing Rover being reeled in with a hook in his mouth, asking "If you wouldn't do this to a dog, why do it to a fish?" Fishing, you say, is cruel and unnecessary. I read your case against fishing on your web site, which you dub FishingHurts.com. Ouch!

Some anglers are tempted – unwisely, I think - to dismiss you and other anti-fishing groups, to not take you seriously. One friend's flippant response to your opposition to catch-and-release fishing, where you say letting fish live but with hooks in their mouths is inhumane, was to point out that thousands of kids these days are choosing to pierce their lips and tongues with metal rings, so how bad can it be? I know, not funny.

A Taste of Reality

You'd say the operative word here is choice. You realize that, as Lao-Tzu said, "nature is not human-hearted." Most animals meet a violent, bloody end at the hands (actually, teeth and claws) of another animal higher on the food chain. That's the natural order of things. If you've seen predation in the wild, you know it can make death from a hunter's bullet or an angler's hook seem like a walk in the park. It ain't pretty and it's got to hurt. But animals kill because they have no choice, you say. We do. Yes, and I say our ethics come into play in the personal choices we make, including whether to fish or not to fish, as well as in how we fish.

I think PETA is off base in attacking fishing (or hunting for that matter) as a violation of an animal's rights, and I'll tell you why. As an environmentalist, I understand what distinguishes mankind from the other animals - the responsibility that comes with being able to make choices - while not believing that this also separates us from them. On the contrary, it binds us together. I subscribe to the philosophy of Aldo Leopold, who said that all ethics evolve from the single premise that we are interdependent members

of a community, the boundaries of which include all of nature. "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right," he wrote. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise."

We are players, not bystanders, and the rules (that is, our ethics) should reflect that. I think there is a distinction between man trying to live as a part of nature and attempting to conquer and suppress it. The ethical hunter and fisherman – no, that's *not* an oxymoron - fits into the first category and is therefore right, according to Leopold. What you and many other animal rights groups don't appreciate is that man's relationship with wild animals, acted out in cooperation with nature's rules, is very different from our relationship with captive (domesticated) animals and implies a distinct set of ethics.

Changing Relationships

I can see where you're coming from, even if I don't like where you're going. The history of man's relationship with the other animals is curious, if not downright mystifying. In more primitive times, we worshipped them as the earthly embodiment of the gods, or the vessels of the souls of our ancestors. Some time later, we would slay them on the sacrificial altar in honor of a god created in the human image. We brought the dog and cat into our homes, where we protect them with our love and our laws. This, while we declared war on their wild cousins and sought their extermination from the ever-expanding human environment. We teach our children to delight in the idyllic image of gentle farm animals in a pastoral setting. Then we hide from them the gruesome reality of their life and death on modern "factory farms," where animals are mass-produced under the most unnatural conditions imaginable.

But if denying other animals their nature is wrong, so is denying ours. The reality of fishing doesn't need to be hidden, nor should anglers be made to feel defensive about choosing to fish. It has its roots in earliest civilization and responsible anglers today strive to follow an ethic that respects nature and – whether you believe it or not – the fish. In the scheme of things, what happens to fish at the hands of fishermen is what happens to fish all over the planet every day. But you seem to forget that these fish live their lives in their natural environment (not in pens or cages) – they grow, mate, give birth and ultimately die according to complex and extraordinary natural processes, of which we are a part. Moreover, it is conservation-minded fishermen who spearhead and fund efforts to preserve that natural environment.

I know you've heard it all before, but when anglers say that fishing provides them a valuable connection to the natural world, it's not just rhetoric. Look around you. We're losing it. We're paving paradise. Mother Nature's on the run. I don't know what the planet our grandchildren inherit is going to be like, but when I think of how much of the natural world has disappeared in the last half century, I cringe. Fishing is "one way for the individual to get outdoors and exercise his/her primal identity, to revive a fundamental part of our being that is too often repressed in the modern temper." I wrote

that years ago and I still believe it. And because people hunt and fish, there is a standing army on the front lines, fighting to hold on to as much of our natural world as possible, and that includes the animals, too.

Who put an end to shark finning? Who's bringing down the dams to free up wild rivers to save salmon from extinction? Who's restoring the Everglades? It's not you. It's fishermen, and environmentalists working side by side with fishermen. Think about it this way. We could achieve all of the goals that PETA is working for – eliminate all the suffering at the hands of humans – and still lose everything; lose the forest for saving the trees. The “brave new world” could be a humane one, but it could also be one we – and the animals - wouldn't want to, or couldn't, live in.

Easy Targets

I can't help but feel that your efforts would be better spent addressing the real affronts to nature instead of engaging in a misguided attack on fishing. Go after the factory farms, the back-lot circuses that torment and humiliate, the laboratories that torture to produce new and improved cosmetics. I'm with you. I mean, it's not like you've had so much success protecting animals from these truly cruel and unnatural practices that you've now got nothing better to do than take to the fields and streams and throw yourselves between predators and their prey.

Which brings me to this: I can't help but feel that the emergence of your increasingly virulent anti-fishing campaign reflects a movement toward a path of less resistance. Perhaps you sense far greater public opposition to hunting and fishing, and therefore an easier target (and dare I say, fundraising tool?), since the number of people who don't hunt or fish far exceeds the number who would be willing to give up eating meat. And I've noticed that your anti-fishing campaign in the media is predominantly aimed at sport fishing, which makes me believe you also know the number of people who don't fish vastly outnumbers those willing to forego seafood.

To be sure, there is a lot that fishermen can do to make this a better world, including much more they can do for the fish. I write about it all the time. What you say about the dangers of fishing litter (discarded monofilament line, etc.) to animals is right on. We do preach on these subjects, but probably not enough.

Finally, you don't know me, but you probably think you've got me pegged. I'm guessing you're wrong, but this isn't about me. As I said, I'm an environmentalist and as I see it, my job is to ensure an abundance of wild places and wild animals so society and individuals, today and tomorrow, can make choices from the fullest array of options. One of those choices is to fish or not to fish.

I'll wrap this letter up now. Thanks for your attention. I don't expect I've changed your mind. I can only hope that, just as your campaign seeks to make people think about fishing in a new way, I might get you to do the same.